

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

FOLK RELIGION IN THE SLAVE QUARTERS

279

completes the process of joining the Church and Praise House. According to Patricia Guthrie who did field work in the Sea Islands, "entrance into the religious and the politico-jural domains parallels the time when plantation membership becomes fully realized," or when a person "catches sense." Joining the Praise House formally expressed this initiation into the plantation domain. An individual was no longer merely a member of a household but a citizen of the plantation community, and a member of the Church. Thus personhood was attained through "catching sense." All members had to answer to the religious court system when discord arose. The Praise House law was considered the "just law," and when disputes arose, settlement was reached in the religious court. Praise House membership demanded that all grievances go before this "Committee." The "unjust law" was essentially white law.⁶ This raises questions about how plantation membership functioned before widespread Christian teaching by whites, and before freedom. The benne seed ritual indicates that before Methodist missionaries came, plantation depredations against the master did not warrant censure in the slave quarters. It is doubtful that this changed even after slaves "accepted" white Christianity. Internal association among any group is more significant than outside forces, especially if the outside element is an oppressive one. Also, community leaders did not go about seeking wrongdoers. Instead, cases were reported by other church members or by individuals involved in the grievance. Obviously a case brought to the leader's attention by the planter had to be acted upon. But the Gullahs did not view plantation "discipline" from the master's perspective, or as "just law."

The religious court heard both sides of a dispute and encouraged the parties to reach an agreement without input from the Praise House leader or other church members. Usually cases were settled at the first level. If not, the case went to the leader and then to the membership. The religious court system was respected and taken seriously. The small amount of crimes after slavery indicate that few Gullahs came before it and few wanted to be censured for misconduct. The ultimate aim of the religious court was to maintain "peace and harmony" in the community. The Gullahs believed this was best accomplished by settling disputes within the group. There was strong disapproval of anyone who went to the master or, after slavery, to the secular authorities. Such a person did not want a settlement, but to merely create more trouble for the group.⁷

The same attachment to religion and community membership that existed among West Africans was observed among the Gullahs. At the

794
175
567
(805)

(795)
(692)

(797)

175
795
692
567

175
795
794

159 have forty to fifty children to one teacher, and have to carry 'em from
 871 scratch to seventh grade.

177 So we know that was a terrible condition, and that's the condition that
 185 I want to try to eliminate. And that's my reason for not taking this bribe. I
 (661) know that we wouldn't have gotten anywhere, not as long as I was willing
 to take bribe and go along with the white folks. I had made some enemy
 by not taking the bribe. I had made some of my people afraid of me because
 I kept on fighting for the Negroes' right. But I didn't stop.

159 The white folks cut off this one big plantation that I used to haul to, as I
 494 had three buses and two trucks. Sometimes I make sixty dollars, sixty to
 177 eighty dollars a day, with three or four vehicle—twenty dollars for each one
 (465) —to carry the people there. They cut that off, but I wouldn't stop. I keep on
 driving and keep on fighting.

872 Since we have gotten the high school, now we have had quite a few
 873 children graduated from the high school here on the island. Since then we
 494 have been able to get this consolidated grammar school, and we have buses.

Mr. Esau Jenkins

WE DIDN'T HAVE A CHANCE
 WHEN WE GO INTO COURT

159 I'll tell you another way voting was able to help us. I could remember
 177 not too long ago, we didn't have a chance when we go into court. I remem-
 692 ber a day I was riding with a man coming to Johns Island from Charleston,
 666 and a white person ran into the back of his truck. When we stop to find
 out what happen to the person, the law took side with the person who ran
 into the back of his truck, and he had to go to court.

We all thought that the judge would say, "Well, somebody ran into
 the back of the truck, certainly seem like that person is wrong." Unfortu-
 nately, he said that the colored man was wrong. He didn't have a chance in
 the court. But we decided to change that thing by getting people to see the
 importance of citizenship, registration and voting.

159 We got them to be interested in organizing what we call the Progressive
 494 Club. I emphasize the word "progressive" which mean look upward, do
 222 something better. And in this club we told them that if you're not registered
 185

185

159

22

479

185

to start with, you're going to have to become a registered citizen if you join. And we ask every individual to pay twenty-five cent per month. For what? Just in case when you go into these unjust courts, your money pools and somebody'll stand the bonds, or pay the fine. Now things are changed. The time would come when this same magistrate who have never listened to Negroes would need their vote.

159

22

479

185

One year when he ran for the third time, the white folks decided to vote against him—not all the white folks, just about fifty percent of them. And he was thinking about dropping out of the election. He came to me and ask, "What can you all do? I understand that the white folks is against me because in the court sometime ago I was little bit lenience with Negro."

So I told him if he would promise that he would treat Negroes better, make them realize that they are human being when they come into the court, not charge them for everything or just assume that they are wrong, but just give them what belongs to them—if they are right, let them know they are right—I said, "We will vote for you. We got a few Negroes voting. If you got fifty percent of your people, the rest of the Negroes certainly would turn the tide."

And when that night came, he won by the many Negroes had registration certificate. That change the situation. That magistrate now, whenever our people go into the court, he is very frank and fair with us. And so for that reason, we felt like the more we could get people registered, the better it would be.

Mrs. Alice Wine

HE IS A WONDERFUL CONQUEROR

159

479

We start the Progressive Club with about two or three hundred head of people in '48 or '49. We used to meet in Moving Star Hall every third Sunday and pay twenty-five cents a head. And after we done pay out for that piece of property we got now, we stop paying monthly dues.

159

443

479

185

There was a schoolhouse there, but we turn 'em into a store after we buy 'em. We put all our money together and open 'em up. And we call 'em Progressive Club. We been growing and growing. We is still in debt, but we are going on. And Mr. Jenkins, he is so good, he is so kind, so soft-

6: Smith

I,Y-5

(no date) 1989

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

33

121 particularly of the status accorded are reflective of West
178 African family and tribal traditions. Among West African
855 tribes, it is a general rule that elders are charged with
the responsibility of maintaining and teaching the tribe
and family linkage and histories. In this role, elders
act as judges of whether younger parents are rearing chil-
dren in the traditional mold. Sea Island elders are charged
with similar responsibilities. In earlier times, the island
elders were responsible for making and interpreting the
Black law. Disputes between neighbors or families were
settled by indigenous elder councils. Only disputes which
drew the attention of the White world were brought to the
White man's court. The isolation of the Sea Islands often
made the elder councils of each island the primary legal
body. Likewise, the few numbers of Whites inhabiting the
islands supported the functioning of the elder councils.

623 Although their functions have been limited, the elder
888 Sea Island councils have been retained to date. The extent
178 to which the high status accorded elders in the Sea Island
121 household has changed, as a consequence of assimilation can
[77] only be postulated. Similarly, the literature offers few
clear statements on commonality of roles and of attitudes
toward elders found among Sea Island and West African
121 parents. Finally, there are few statements comparing Sea
855 Island and West African child rearing practices.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930

(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23

South Carolina

St. Helena Island

THE AFTERMATH

209

When a person wished to become a member of the church, he must go into seclusion for two or three weeks until he had received a vision that his sins had been forgiven. During this time of seclusion, he was said to be "seeking." Upon the genuineness of his vision the praise leader must pass judgment. Then the candidate must go through the catechism, thoroughly memorizing every sentence, and pass two examinations in the praise house and one in the church before being admitted to baptism. Once admitted, he wore the head cloth of the candidate until the day of baptism which was usually on communion Sunday. Dressed in white robes, the candidates came to the river at high tide to receive the ordinance of baptism. Miss Towne described a baptism in January, 1876, as being lengthy but impressive. Before communion, which preceded the baptismal service, the minister told the church members "that they were not to take a long drink of wine, but a sip only—that he had been told that 'some of they said they meant to get their two cents' worth.' (That is the amount generally subscribed by each to buy the wine.) He told them that was very naughty conduct in church members." The elders, Miss Towne explained, "used to take the first filled cup, throw back their heads, and drain it with gusto. That was their idea of partaking of the Lord's Supper." Communion over, the members filed outside to the river bank and amid prayer and song the candidates were immersed.

As in slavery days, the praise leaders attempted to regulate the affairs of the praise members, so in freedom the officers of the praise houses and the churches sought to regulate all the private and public disputes arising on

175
795
787

175
795
792

175
788
795

175
793
692

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
St. Helena Island

210

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SEA ISLANDS

175 the Island. As one of the preachers explained, "when one
993 member gets wrong and the case cannot be settled at home
692 it is taken to the church and sometimes the member is
subjected [to] little embarrassment."²⁵

175 It was many years, however, before the praise houses
692 and churches obtained the prestige in settling disputes that
they exercise today. In the first days of freedom, the cases
going up to the "unjust law," as the people term legal
processes, were numerous. Miss Towne's brother, Wil-
liam Edward Towne, was appointed a magistrate for St.
Helena in 1869. "Some days half a dozen cases are
brought before him," wrote Miss Towne, "and one day in
the week, Tuesday, he and the other two selectmen have
a meeting and make out jury lists, and do all sorts of town-
ship business. . . . I think a constable or two are here
every day, to get orders or bring culprits."²⁶

175 In 1866, as it has already been pointed out, the school
658 farms were sold and the plantation schools abandoned, but
891 the fund arising from the sale of the land was set aside for
the establishment of schools in St. Helena's and St. Luke's
parishes "without distinction of race or color." By 1871
this fund had amounted to something more than \$68,000.²⁷
The benevolent associations, such as the Pennsylvania
Freedmen's Relief Association, the Germantown Associ-

²⁵ MS, "St. Helena." In possession of Penn School.

²⁶ *Letters and Diary*, pp. 210, 211.

²⁷ *Senate Mis. Doc. no. 79*, 41st Cong., 3d sess. In response to an inquiry from Congress as to "the total amount of funds in the hands of any officer of the Government, set apart for the purposes of education in the parishes of St. Helena and St. Luke, in Beaufort County, South Carolina," Commissioner A. Pleasanton replied: ". . . there is invested in United States bonds . . . about \$57,000; and there is in the hands of Collector Cloutman, of the second district, South Carolina, between three and four thousand dollars, and in the hands of Hon. W. E. Wording, not yet turned over to Collector Cloutman, between eight and nine thousand dollars."